

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Pathological Identities: Implications for Research and Teaching**

**By Tyrone C. Howard,  
Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

Tyrone C. Howard is a professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles; Terry K. Flennaugh is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education of the College of Education at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan; and Clarence L. Terry, Sr. is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Occidental College, Los Angeles, California.

*Mental pictures, stereotypes, and fake histories, reinforcesmysteries.... .andwhenmysteryisreinforced it only means that knowledge has been lost.*

—KRS-One

Social imagery has been part of the United States landscape since the country's inception. Social imagery, or the manner in which perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about certain groups shapes people's understanding of those groups, has served as a hallmark upon which social domination, economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement have formed the experiences of diverse cultural groups in the U.S. (Horsman, 1981; Spring, 2006). Social imagery becomes an integral part of a population's thinking when it is institutionalized for a sustained period of time through different venues, and shapes generations of people's thinking about a particular reality or perceived reality. David Bloor

### **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

(1991), who has written extensively on social imagery, contends that it consists of “those beliefs which people confidently hold to and live by. In particular...the beliefs which are taken for granted or institutionalized, or invested with authority by groups of people” (p. 5). Social imagery frequently becomes reified through the use of tools, language, forms of media, constructed knowledge, and the purported experiences that are displayed and widely distributed about a particular group. In some instances, the group’s circumstances or position within a given society can reinforce the widely held societal views of the group. Throughout the history of the U.S., racialized groups have often had their experiences profoundly shaped by social imagery in ways that have created tremendous hardships in the quest for self-actualization and a healthy sense of self.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the manner in which Black males have been one of the primary victims of negative social imagery and how the remnants of these constructions continue to have contemporary influences, particularly when it comes to their schooling experiences in the U.S. The goal of this work is to make an argument for the generation of new ideas, different conceptual frameworks, and innovative methods of inquiry that can be useful in dismantling negative imagery of Black males. It is the hope that these new approaches to studying Black males may play an important role in creating useful research, theory, and practices that will help to improve the schooling experiences and educational outcomes for Black males, who consistently find themselves at the bottom of most academic indices (Howard, 2008; Howard & Flennaugh, 2010).

We operate from the position that large numbers of Black males experience education in a manner unlike most groups in the U.S. and that these experiences are rooted in a historical construction of what it means to be Black and male. These experiences, we assert, are often guided by a less than flattering account of the academic potential, intellectual disposition, and social and cultural capital possessed by Black males (Hutchison, 1994). Moreover, our contention is that not only do these notions of Black males shape their schooling experiences, but may severely influence their life chances at a time where educational access is vital to competing in an increasingly global society. This consequence is most disturbing given the manner in which disproportionate numbers of Black men continue to find themselves socially, economically, and politically excluded from the American mainstream.

We engage in this analysis of Black males in schools and society with a full recognition that despite the multitude of obstacles and challenges that have confronted Black males in the United States historically and contemporarily, there are instances of exceptional Black men who have overcome these obstacles to enjoy social, economic, and political upward mobility. The election of President Obama serves as a highly visible example—as does the election of Black men who have gone on to become prominent mayors in some of America’s largest cities (e.g., Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, Harold Washington in Chicago, David Dinkins in New York, to name a few). In addition, there are a large number of Black men who occupy prominent professional positions in their respective communities. The number of

---

**Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

---

Black male attorneys, law enforcement officials, entrepreneurs, educators, architects, and engineers often go unnoticed by the larger society and media. However, we cannot ignore the reality that for each Black male who has enjoyed any degree of social or economic mobility, there are disproportionate numbers who continue to experience varying degrees of disenfranchisement. We are also mindful that the upward mobility of fortunate Black males is not always attributable to the “kind smile” of U.S. life, law, and educational opportunity—but rather in spite of it.

Finally, this article offers an account of how researchers and practitioners can conduct their work in a manner that rejects pathological identities for Black males in P-12 schools, and instead develops a more comprehensive and complex account that recognizes Black males’ academic promise and multifaceted identities. It is critical that the success stories of Black males become more recognizable and commonplace and that these realities become more attainable for young Black men at-large. We seek to examine some of the concerns about the manner in which Black males are frequently viewed in schools and offer important design principles that can be utilized by educational practitioners, researchers—and Black males themselves—to disrupt deficit accounts of Black male academic and social potential.

---

**Educational State of Affairs for African-American Males**

A voluminous number of statistics explain the severity and persistence of academic underachievement and social challenges of African-American males in PreK-12 schools. In many states across the country, the numbers are mind-numbing. A majority of African-American males in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades do not reach grade-level proficiency in reading, mathematics, history, and science (NCES, 2007, 2009). Fewer than 10% of African-American males were at or above grade level in these same subject matter areas. Equally as disturbing is the fact that fewer than 3% performed at advanced levels in these areas (NCES, 2007, 2009). Young Black males are more likely to be suspended or expelled from schools than any other group (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba et al., 2007). African-American males currently make up approximately 8.1% of the nation’s student population, yet they make up a disproportionate number of students receiving special education and remedial services. African-American males comprise approximately 26% of students, nationwide, identified as “educable mentally-retarded,” 34% of students diagnosed with serious emotional disorders, and 33% of students identified as “trainable mentally-retarded,” or developmentally-delayed (Harry & Klingner, 2006). The disproportionate representation of various ethnic groups in special education has been documented by a number of scholars (e.g., Harry & Klingner, 2006; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Markowitz et al., 1997). However, it is clear that no other group has been more adversely affected by disproportional special education placements than African-American males (Ford, 1996; Noguera, 2008; Price, 2000; Skiba et al., 2007).

The challenges that many Black males encounter in schools explain why the dropout rate for them is among the highest of any subgroup in the country. During

### **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

the 2005-2006 academic year, 47% of African-American males *did not* receive diplomas with their classmates after four years of high school (Schott Foundation, 2008). In fact, according to the Schott Report (2008), dropout rates for Black males were as high as 60% in some of America's major urban cities; in states such as Illinois, New York, and Wisconsin, there was a graduation gap of at least 50 percent between Black males and their White male counterparts. Without sufficient educational opportunities and prerequisite skill sets necessary for economic mobility in an increasingly compressed labor market, Black males are among the first to be squeezed out of viable job opportunities, thus increasing the likelihood of their participation in illegal activity, and subsequent involvement in the penal system. The U.S. Department of Justice (2009) reports that Black men are incarcerated at 6.6 times the rate of White men, with almost one in every 20 Black men spending some time in jail or prison at some point in their life. Approximately 37 percent of all male inmates in 2008 were Black males, despite the fact that the group composes only 7% of the nation's population (Howard, 2010). These disturbing numbers should raise questions about the institutions that create such unwelcoming circumstances for Black males. The question that begs further exploration is to what degree, if any, have social imagery and constructed notions of Black males continued to play out in the manner in which this population is theorized and studied?

The examination of disproportionate academic outcomes, special education and dropout rates, and the incarceration numbers for Black males should be taken with a note of caution. On the surface, these numbers can easily convey that there is something "wrong" with Black males due to their inability to adapt and thrive academically and behaviorally in schools and society. This thinking reinforces negative perceptions of Black male potential. We contend that a more critical analysis of Black male outcomes in schools should be linked to structural conditions and arrangements in the schools and society that produce such alarming numbers. Part of *depathologizing* Black males and reconstructing another type of social imagery is to place appropriate scrutiny on institutional practices, structural arrangements, cultural practices, and ideologies which create the conditions that may stifle the intellectual, academic, and social growth and development of Black males. The challenge that exists for advocates of Black males is initiating the disruption of pathological and deficit-based ideologies in the face of a preponderance of evidence that supports the reification of academic and social shortcomings. We ascertain that one of the ways to deconstruct this social imagery of Black males is to understand the historical context which has shaped the negative social imagery of Black males over time.

---

### **Black Males and Social Imagery**

An exhaustive body of literature has examined race and educational inequity. Scrutiny of this work is vital in evaluating the state of affairs for Black males, past and present. Some of this work has been centered on a political economy framework, providing the critical argument through in-depth analysis that some ethnic and racial groups benefit from schools while others do not (Anyon, 1997, 2005;

### **Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

---

MacLeod, 1995, Oakes, 1995; Willis, 1981). Understanding schooling strictly from a capitalist standpoint, social reproduction theorists have argued that the function and purpose of schools has been to deliberately produce a semi-skilled labor force, to reinforce existing class arrangements, and to maintain the structural arrangements of a capitalist society, while still promoting the appearance of meritocracy, fairness, and equity (Anyon, 1997; Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Kozol, 1991; MacLeod, 1995, Oakes, 1985; Willis, 1981). These works have important explanations that speak directly to the social and economic conditions that large numbers of Black men face.

What is disturbingly absent from the political economy analysis of schooling is the racialized ideological constructions which foster negative beliefs about Blacks in general, and Black males in particular. The manner in which Black men have been characterized in American society has been well documented (Gibbs, 1988; Ferguson, 2001; Madhubuti, 1990). A number of scholars have described the evolution of Black male characterizations over the past several centuries. Early 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century images typically cast Black men as physically strong, mentally inept, hyper-sexed brutes who were well suited for slavery, and deemed to be subhuman. Over time, the image became more entrenched of Black men being lazy, docile, and inhumane savages. We have also witnessed the depiction of Black males as the Sambo or minstrel character, who only sought to entertain their superiors. Many of the twentieth century depictions painted Black males as pimps, thugs, hustlers, and law-breaking slicksters who were not to be trusted, were not worthy of equal treatment, and needed to be marginalized because they were a “menace to society,” prone to violence, and constantly involved in gangs and drugs (Bogle, 2001; Diawara, 1993). These characterizations have become entrenched in the public mind through pseudo-scientific research, literary sources of the day, cinematic outlets, and persistent caricatures. These caricatures contributed to the development of an image that perpetuates widespread disdain for Black men. This disdain, undergirded by an assumption of White supremacy, subsequently affected their life chances and labor opportunities. To illustrate the point, Wilson’s (1996) Urban Poverty and Family Life Study’s survey of a representative sample of Chicago-area employers found disturbing results about the depiction of Black males as potential employees. Employers from 179 firms found problematic results with the manner in which Black men were viewed. Wilson states:

Of the 170 employers who provide comments on one or more these traits, 126 (or 74 percent) expressed views of inner-city Blacks that were coded as “negative”—that is, they expressed views (whether in terms of environmental or neighborhood influences, family influences, or personal characteristics) asserting that inner city Black workers—especially Black males—bring to the workplace traits, including level of training and education, that negatively affect their job performance. (p. 112)

Wilson (2009) expounded on this work by documenting the manner in which potential employers hold viewpoints about Black males. He stated that the results

### **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

suggested “employers make generalizations about inner city Black male workers and reach decisions based on those assumptions without reviewing the qualifications of an individual applicant” (p. 73). Wilson’s findings also revealed that many employers preferred Black women and recent immigrants of both genders as prospective employees to black males because they perceived them to be dangerous or threatening in part because of perceived incarceration rates.

Wilson (2009) also stated that Black males suffer disproportionately from what he terms as the “new urban poverty” (p. 56). His analysis shows that the unemployment levels of Black males surpass those of every other subgroup and exclude them from active participation in an economy that continues to be dependent upon highly skilled labor force and adequate levels of education, which many Black males are frequently lacking. He also maintains that the blue-collar jobs that were supposed to be available for undereducated Black males have, by and large, vanished due to outsourcing or enhanced technology. Page (1997) similarly argued that the rapid reorganization of the global economic order has forced African-American men into the bottom of the hierarchy organizing workers in the new information age. Page contended that, “our assumptions about ‘Black male’ capability derive from the representation of African-American men in local and national media” (p. 99). If we can recognize that media production of Black male imagery is one of the many White cultural practices undergirding the formation of a new world order, then we must...“decolonize the production and dissemination of media representations by developing more appropriate modes of anthropological observation” (p. 99).

The perpetuation of negative attitudes toward Black males is troubling because it often starts at an early age and becomes normalized in the national psyche. In her field notes which summarized the “institutional narrative” on children and academic outcomes, Ferguson (2001) wrote:

According to the statistics, the worse-behaved children in the school are Black and male, and when they take tests they score way below their grade level. They eat candy, refuse to work, fight, gamble, chase, hit, instigate, cut class, cut school...They are defiant, disruptive, disrespectful, and profane. These Black males fondle girls, draw obscene pictures, make lewd comments, intimidate others, and call teacher names. They are banished from the classroom to the hall, to the discipline office, to the suspension room, to the streets so that others can learn. (p. 46)

Ferguson went on to further state that: “In the range of normalizing judgments, there is a group of African-American boys identified by school personnel as, in the words of a teacher, ‘unsalvageable.’” Furthermore, she stated that, “School personnel argue over whether these unsalvageable boys should be given access even to the special programs designed for those who are failing in school. Should resources defined as scarce, be wasted on these boys for whom there is no hope?” (p. 96). Accounts such as these provide further insight into the fact that the bad boy image of Black males occurs early and can often disrupt any efforts for normative social and psychological development.

In addition to discussing the documented “institutional practices that produce

---

**Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

---

social identities of *at-risk*, troublemakers, *unsalvageables*,” Ferguson (2001) analyzed “how and why many African-American boys actively distance and separate themselves from school as a desirable and authoritative object of identification while simultaneously embracing alternative subject positions as a means for becoming visible and gaining recognition in the social world” (p. 97). The Black males she encountered found it necessary to “actively configure self through two social identities, race and gender, to provide the social, psychic, and emotional resources for recouping a sense of self as competent and admirable in an institutional setting where they have been categorized as problems or as failures” (p. 97).

Noguera (2003) has called for research that attempts to understand Black males’ perspectives on social imagery (images of violence)—particularly on how Black males interact and understand these images—and subsequently how they identify with them personally. His research revealed that Black males identified more strongly with images of individuals who avoided conflict than those that did not. These findings contradicted messages built into entertainment media that Black males strongly identify with individuals who perpetrate violence. In short, this relationship is nuanced and needs to be studied further if there is to be a revised, more compassionate, and humane notion of Black males.

One of the challenges with social imagery is that the constructed descriptions and understandings of particular groups can be rooted in false depictions that ultimately present distorted notions of a group’s history, culture, practices, and norms (Bloor, 1991). This has been an ongoing challenge in the creation of an image for Black males. As a result, inaccurate portrayals of groups can contribute to the development and maintenance of deeply ingrained ideas and beliefs about groups that can profoundly shape their experiences in a given society. A number of important works have documented how race is a socially constructed concept that has been vital in creating social, political, and economic hierarchies in the U.S. (Gould, 1981; Horsman, 1981; Marable, 1992, 1995, 1997; Selden, 1999). One of the central features of these works is the manner in which social imagery was reified through the use of the popular press, literature, and trade books of the time, and often strongly reinforced through the use of research and theory to construct images about different racial groups’ superiority and inferiority (Banks, 1993). What is consistently clear in each of these works is the role that researchers played in “confirming” or “authenticating” negative accounts of various racial groups.

Horsman (1981) in particular explained how, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American politicians, intellectuals, and the general public overwhelmingly spoke about, believed, and explained their country’s success in racial terms. American ideology had shifted from an emphasis on superior institutions to dominant racial characteristics. He stated that “the new science of man in the first half of the nineteenth century was ultimately decisive in giving a racial cast to Anglo-Saxonism” (p. 43). The scientific study of the time typically lacked any objective or rigorous approaches but was “brought forward to support the general idea of inherent differences” (p.53) among the races. This thinking, and the creation of social imagery at the

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

time, became accepted by most of the intellectual community and the general public in the name of “scientific” evidence for Anglo-Saxon superiority—and explained and justified why Blacks were enslaved, Indians were removed from their lands or slaughtered, and the annexation of Mexican territory took place to “spread democracy and American virtue across empty lands” (p. 137) was necessary. In other words, early in America’s development as a nation, it became clear that race mattered.

### **Cultural Explanations and Identity**

Cultural explanations have often been identified as one of the critical variables in identity development. Some researchers have suggested that the misinterpretation of cultural capital possessed by Black males and other culturally diverse students offer an explanation of disparate schooling experiences (Kochman, 1981; Lee, 2004, 2007). Cultural dissonance and incongruence that exists between culturally diverse students and their school environments frequently results in discriminatory practices such as low-end tracking, low teacher expectations, and an increase in punitive actions (Howard, 2010; Oakes, 1985). The degree to which these cumulative effects influence African-American males and the individuals who teach and study them is critical. Several scholars have explored how students’ self-constructed perceptions are shaped by race, stereotypes that come with them, and ultimately school performance. Steele and Aronson (1995) have discussed stereotype threat as a “social psychological predicament rooted in the prevailing image of African-Americans as intellectually inferior” (p. 19).

This informed Steele’s (2010) later work which found that the most immediate effect of stereotype threat can be the anxiety that undermines academic performance, particularly for women and culturally diverse students. Steele’s work found that when women, and African-American and Latino undergraduate students were informed that members of their respective groups had not fared well on previous academic tasks, these members did not perform well on varying cognitive tasks. Steele has suggested that when students are mindful of negative stereotypes that exist about their group membership, even as they try to combat such stereotypes, they still perform poorly, thus showing the pervasiveness of the stereotype threat and reinforcing the importance of social imagery and its effects on Black males. These findings underscore the prevailing thought that stereotype affects school performance for certain students, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is essential to consider Steele’s work when examining the manner in which Black males make meaning of their identities and their subsequent school performance. The challenge of making meaning of an imposed identity, which does not reflect on one favorably, and then fighting to debunk that image raises serious concerns about how school performance plays out.

Identity is critical because it shapes the manner in which young people view themselves and the manner in which they perform in schools. Steele (2010) discussed the salience of *identity contingencies*, or social markers that are carried by

various groups in a society. Moreover, the contingencies, or the things that one has to deal with because of his or her group membership, can take a tremendous toll on stigmatized groups. Scott (1997) wrote about how social science researchers have historically depicted African Americans in a persistent deficit framework and, by continuing to focus exclusively on deficiencies over all other characteristics, there is resultant “psychic damage” that can occur within the group. Steele (2010) discussed the way that repeated social messages about a group being aggressive, hostile, less intelligent, and less compassionate—all terms that have been used to characterize Black males—can take a cumulative toll and lead to the internalization of self-doubt, lack of motivation, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence. These are all factors that may ultimately influence behavior and performance in school contexts.

The importance of social psychology in examining race, identity, and performance cannot be lost on the social imagery of Black males and the manner in which racial identity is constructed. Loury (2002) used the term “racial stigma” to describe the way that race affects many Blacks. He used Goffman’s (1963) framework of stigma and contended that there are distinctions between how identity is constructed from outsider and insider perspectives. Central to the idea is the way that the outside construction of a person or group can be damaging to the construction of self for members of racialized groups. He maintained that the outsider perspectives, which are shaped by historical and contemporary circumstances and realities, are the equivalent to a social marker or stigmatized classification that becomes difficult to transform; thus, the individual has to be increasingly conscious of how that perspective influences behavior. Loury (2002) wrote, “the idea of racial stigma can be used to gain insight into problems of perception, representation, and standing in contemporary American public life that adversely affects blacks” (p. 61).

The development of identity is a fragile and ever-changing process for all individuals. Undoubtedly, a person comes to develop a sense of self that has been consciously and unconsciously shaped by outsider and insider perspectives. The argument that we seek to make is that Black males often have to *actively undo* a significant amount of social and historical stigmas in order to develop a healthy and productive sense of self. There remains a pressing need to eradicate the negative racial stigma that continues to be ever-present. Though many will contend that the pervasive and pernicious nature of overt racial prejudice has declined in the post-Civil Rights era, many of its remnants continue to shape attitudes, perceptions, and ideologies of racialized populations (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). We assert that as much as Black males, as insiders, need to be actively engaged in constructing positive identities, much remains to be done in the creation of outsider perspectives of Black males. The research and scholarship of social scientists can play an important role in the recreation of more healthy and affirming depictions of Black males.

### **Principles to Disrupt and Dismantle Dominant Discourses on Black Males**

Given the challenges that continue to afflict African-American males in schools and society, it is imperative for scholars and practitioners to give consideration to the manner in which their work can be done in a way that contributes to the recasting of the Black male social image. Part of the work that must be done to change the manner in which Black males are viewed requires stepping out of age-old paradigms that have created distorted and debilitating images of Black males. We suggest that careful reflection and consideration be given to the way in which our research, theory, teaching, and learning coincides with the ways that Black males see the world around them and seek ways to create a more affirming and humane image. The reality is that most young Black males are not incarcerated, most do not commit crimes, and most of them do not terrorize their communities. Most are caring, loving, and thoughtful sons, brothers, cousins, nephews, uncles, and, in some cases, fathers. For too long, the construction of Black male identity renders them as cold, heartless, “natural born killers,” and often, much to our chagrin, many young Black males internalize these depictions, and play out these roles much to their own demise. What follows are considerations that we suggest will help to guide our thinking in future research and practice with young Black males. These principles are not exhaustive, but offer cautions, concerns, and considerations (Howard & Flennaugh, 2010) that may be useful in recreating the social imagery of Black males.

---

#### **Principle #1:**

##### **Abandon theoretical approaches on Black males that are ‘deficit’-oriented.**

Historically, theoretical approaches to research on Black males have focused on what these students—and by extension the families and communities they come from—*lack* intellectually, socially, and culturally (Moynihan, 1965). Researchers interested in students of color, in large part, have pathologized these populations by continuously studying those who are not doing well, or questioning their innate intelligence, or lack thereof (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Terman, 1916). In many ways, contemporary researchers have adopted similar stances, even as they attempt to disrupt discriminatory school practices. Deficit-based practices have been heavily influenced by the early Eugenics Movement in the United States which aside from advocating for White supremacy in domestic policy also promoted highly problematic theoretical approaches to scholarship on and about people of color in the United States, which showed how much they varied from a White-centric norm (Selden, 1999). Its impact can be seen in deficit-oriented studies that have sought to identify what Black males and other communities of color lack as opposed to what these populations do to excel in the face of numerous political, social, and economic barriers (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). While the scholarship that

examines the challenges of Black males can be important for understanding the impact of key social and institutional circumstances, work that highlights models for success may lead to more significant change in conditions for Black males and communities of color.

Noguera (2008) argued that despite the broad array of difficulties that Black males face, it is important for educational researchers to acknowledge both the fact that Black males have found ways to achieve in today's school settings and that environmental and cultural factors play significant roles in the academic success of Black males. Noguera's (2008) call for work that does not begin with what Black males lack is important because it encourages researchers to accept the premise that the structure of many American institutions have failed to adequately address the needs of historically marginalized communities. A number of Black males continue to reach academic success in spite of educational institutions and not because of them. We suggest additional studies that examine Black male success in schools, communities, and home. Part of the work that needs to be done to transform the social imagery of Black males is for scholars to play a critical role in helping to recreate the image of Black males by highlighting their success. Recently, Chicago's Urban Prep Academy for Young Men publicized that it had graduated all of its senior class (whom are all Black), and that each student was accepted for admission to four-year colleges. Part of the work necessary for scholars interested in Black males' performance is to study the positive things that are happening at schools such as Englewood Prep, highlight the prominence of the accomplishments, examine the practices and school culture, and then raise questions about the replicability of these outcomes given what has been learned.

---

**Principle #2:**  
**Avoid perpetuating a false dichotomy where the challenges for Black males are focused on either individuals or institutions.**

Scholarship in the area of educational achievement for Black males has unfortunately perpetuated a false dichotomy in which the challenges for Black males have typically focused on either individual (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) or institutional (Kozol, 1991) culpability. Needless to say, each of these areas contributes to the circumstances affecting Black males in schools and society. Work that focuses on failures of educational institutions is important; however, as educational researchers, we cannot turn a blind eye to disturbing data that reveal the high amount of television consumed by Black children or the disconnect between educational aspirations and hours spent studying by Black students. Wilson (2009) effectively highlighted the need to adequately examine both structural and cultural conditions to understand the experiences of Black males. The challenge that exists in investigating cultural factors in the schooling experiences of Black males is that researchers can perpetuate a 'blame-the-victim' perspective when interrogating cultural practices that may result in academic and social disenfranchisement (Ryan, 1971). Patterson (2006)

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

makes the call to push carefully in this direction. He stated that, “a deep seated dogma... has prevailed in the social science since the mid 1960’s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group’s cultural attributes—its distinctive attitudes, values, and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members—and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor school, and bad housing” (p. 13).

It is important to note that the intent is not to advocate for assigning equal responsibility of school failure for Black males on Black homes, schools, and communities. However, educational researchers must acknowledge that arguments such as oppositional identity are often inadequate for completely explaining Black male underperformance in schools. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) wrote:

[The oppositional identity] argument is misplaced. If anything, African Americans maintain *more* pro-school values and are *more* likely to esteem their high-achieving peers than are Whites. What African Americans lack, however, are the material conditions that foster the development of skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers. (p. 551)

Therefore, researchers must give careful consideration to more factors that impact the development of Black males in and outside of the classroom. Researchers must avoid demonizing institutions or vilifying individuals and their communities.

---

### **Principle #3:**

#### **Acknowledge the complexity of identity and notions of self among Black males, especially in educational settings.**

Research on the educational experiences of Black males has to recognize the complex nature of Black male identity within the context of learning institutions. The fields of education and psychology have struggled for well over a century to adequately address the significant challenges Black males face in constructing identities that function in institutions of education. Du Bois (1903) paid particular attention to the internal conflict that Black men faced in the United States. His notion of double-consciousness recognized the psychological and sociohistorical realities of American oppression and sought to shed light on the complex ways Black people develop notions of self in America.

More contemporary work on Black males has encouraged educational researchers and identity theorists to acknowledge the often complex ways masculinity plays out among Black men in today’s schools (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Harper and Harris (2010) suggested “moving beyond singular notions of gender” (p. 5) and state that this static understanding of what it means to be Black and male excludes a larger number of Black males who do not locate their identities in such narrow characterizations. These works are important because they operate from a framework that Black males are not monolithic. One of the ways that research on Black males can be enhanced is through the examinations of the comprehensive nature of Black male identity. Nasir et al. (2009) called for “the need for a nuanced conception of African-American racial identity that considers both the strength of the identity

---

**Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

---

and the local meaning of the identity” (p. 107). In their sociocultural and ecological theoretical analysis of achievement, identity, and race for Black students, they discovered that African-American students endorsed a range of identity meanings and that these meanings varied according to the context in which they were shaped.

A topic that may serve as an area for examination is Black males of mixed race heritage. Williams (2009) discussed the glaring absence from the professional literature of the social and psychological adjustment of Black-White biracial students and discussed the complex nature and formations of their identities. She stated that biracial students “encounter unique challenges in the current educational system [and]...researchers need to conduct empirical research on the schooling experiences of Black-White biracial students to gain a clearer understanding of the education of these students” (pp. 799-800). Identifying and examining the multi-faceted nature of Black male identity is critical to recreating a social image of Black males.

---

**Principle #4:**

**Prioritize Black male voices as central for engagement  
and analysis in research and practice.**

Scholarship that places students’ voices at the center of analysis remains severely limited. While a growing number of scholars are seeking to capture the experiences of students in today’s schools (Duncan, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Howard, 2008; Nieto, 1994; Waxman & Huang, 1997), the amount of scholarship that has focused on accessing information from Black males specifically is even smaller. In his research on African American males, Howard (2008) made use of *counter-storytelling* to illuminate the ways Black males make sense of barriers they faced in their quest for academic achievement. He subsequently highlighted the importance of tapping into students’ narratives to understand the internal processes that some Black males go through in order to excel in schools. Duncan (2002), Price (2000), and Dimitriadis (2003) have examined Black male voices and perspectives on education and peers. Narrative inquiry positions student voice and agency as immensely important to the way identities are constructed and understood (Hoshmand, 2005). As these studies have demonstrated, developing scholarship that makes use of Black males’ voices has the potential to advance informed practices that begin to turnaround disturbing trends in the schooling experience of this population.

We suggest that the incorporation of narratives voiced by marginalized persons can also help to dismantle the dominant discourses surrounding race, class, and gender groups. These counterstories represent non-mainstream stories that can represent other truths, and other experiences that directly refute hegemony (Terry, 2011). “Stories told by those on the bottom, told from the ‘subversive-subaltern’ perspective, challenge and expose the hierarchical and patriarchal order that exists within the legal academy [any institution] and pervades the larger society” (Montoya, 1995, p. 537). These stories are much more critical, and they allow the anger and pain of the oppressed storyteller to emerge. Hearing people’s own stories is a powerful way of getting oftentimes reluctant teachers, researchers, or policy makers

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

in training to understand that the theories they are learning about have a material effect on individuals.

---

### **Principle #5:**

#### **Pay attention to the intersectionality of factors such as race, class, gender, and more when examining identity-construction and sense-making with Black males.**

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender are fundamentally critical in research concerned with young Black males. Each marker in its own way profoundly influences identity construction, social imagery, and meaning-making for this population of students. As mentioned earlier, Black males possess multiple identities that are profoundly shaped by race, socioeconomic status, and gender in all of their complex manifestations. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) referred to the intersectional paradigm as an analytical framework that explains the interrelationships of political and social systems of race, class, gender, and other social divisions that may capture the complex realities of multiple forms of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization for non-dominant groups. The social and political arrangements and intersection of these identities play out in unique ways that have critical implications for racial and gender minorities, and in particular for young Black males. Anne Ferguson (2001) wrote:

Sex is a powerful marker of difference as well as race. While the concept of intersecting social categories is a useful analytical device for formulating this convergence, in reality we presume to know each other instantly in a coherent, apparently seamless way. We do not experience individuals as bearers of separate identities as gendered and then raced or vice versa, but both at once. The two are inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representation of subjects and the experience of subjectivity. (pp. 22-23)

A conceptual framework with an explicit examination of the ways race and racism manifest themselves and their juxtaposition with gender in education may offer new analysis into the underachievement of African-American males and provide new insight and direction for reversing their school achievement. Undocumented numbers of institutions and spaces that service the learning and developmental needs of Black males have recently been created in major U.S. cities. The belief behind these spaces is that there is a need to do something different to meet the needs of Black males and that the continuance of the status quo will likely only produce the same dismal outcomes and results.

---

### **Final Considerations**

Needless to say, the disruption and transformation of the perceptions and realities of Black males will not take place over night. The careful and strategic construction of Black males as jesters, clowns, entertainers, sex-crazed brutes, violent hustlers, and law-breaking thugs were centuries in the making. The eradication of these images requires a similar approach of careful thought, reliable and

---

**Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.**

---

sensitive research, and interventions that captures a more realistic, comprehensive, and complex characterization of Black males. Much of the depictions of Black males have permeated from the larger society into schooling practices and policies used by teachers and counselors. Examples would include the harsh use of zero tolerance policies which have disproportionately affected Black males. Much of the challenge is to help research inform practice in a manner that helps Black males experience schools in a different way.

The goal of empowering Black males and recreating their social image through a raised consciousness is not an easy one. Removing the layers of hegemony engraved in the minds is not a simple task. Attempting to shift paradigms is real and can be a major stumbling block to achieving critical consciousness (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 2003) and recreating the imagery of Black males. Part of this paradigm shift must incorporate the views, ideas, and perspectives of Black males themselves in recreating their own image.

We hope that this work makes a contribution to the growing list of scholars who continue to find troubling outcomes with the schooling experiences of Black males. We maintain that social imagery will continue to play a significant role in recreating ideas of what it means to be young, Black, and male. We challenge researchers whose works are concerned with creating equitable schooling circumstances for all students to give careful thought, time, and attention to the promise being shown by Black males who do not drop out of school, who do not commit egregious acts of misbehavior in schools, and who perform admirably in schools every day. Not only is this imperative for the manner in which Black males experience schools, but it has implications for all other groups of students who have experienced education and social marginalization.

---

## **References**

Ainsworth-Darnell, J., & Downey, D. (1998). Assessing the oppositional culture explanation for racial/ethnic differences in school performance. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 536-553.

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and new social movement*. New York: Routledge.

Banks, J. A. (1993). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. *Educational Researcher*, 22(5), 4-14.

Bell, L. A., Washington, S., Weinstein, G., & Love, B. (2003). Knowing ourselves as instructors. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano, & R. Torres. (Eds.) *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 408-429). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Bereiter, C. & Engelmann, S. (1966). *Teaching disadvantaged children in the preschool*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bernstein, B.B. (1975). *Class, codes, and control*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bloor, D. (1991). *Knowledge and social imagery*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

Bogle, D. (2001). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films (4<sup>th</sup> ed)*. New York: Bantam Books.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White supremacy and racism in the Post-Civil Rights era*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London, UK: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and resistance for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.

Department of Justice. (2009). Retrieved November 25, 2009 from www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs.

Diawara, M. (1993). *Black American cinema*. New York: Routledge.

Dimitriadis, G. (2003). *Friendships, cliques, and gangs: Young Black men coming of age in urban America*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. New York: Penguin Group.

Duncan, G. A. (2002). Beyond love: A critical race theory ethnography of the schooling of adolescent Black males. *Equity & Excellence*, 35(2), 131-143.

Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Ford, D. Y. (1996). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students: Promising practices, and programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gibbs, J. T. (1988). *Young, Black, and male in America*. New York: Auburn House.

Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York: Routledge.

Gould, S. J. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: Norton.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Harper, S. R., & Harris, F. (2010). *College men and masculinities: Theory, research, and implications for practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(3), 199-214.

Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2006). *Why are so many minority students in special education?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hernstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.

Horsman, R. (1980). *Race and manifest destiny: The origins of American racial Anglo-saxonism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hoshmand, L. T. (2005). *Culture, psychotherapy, and counseling: Critical and integrative perspectives*. New York: Sage.

Howard, T. C. (2010). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Howard, T. C., & Flennaugh, T. (2011). Research concerns, cautions, & considerations on Black males in a "post-racial" society. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 14(1), 105-120.

Howard, T. C. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African-American males in PreK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 110(5), 954-985.

Hutchison, E. O. (1994). *Assassination of the Black male image*. Los Angeles: Middle Passage Press.

Kochman, T. (1981). *Black and White: Styles in conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago

### Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flennaugh, & Clarence L. Terry, Sr.

---

Press.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in American schools*. New York: HarperCollins.

Ladner, M., & Hammons, C. (2001). Special but unequal: Race and special education. In C. Finn, A.J. Rotherham, & C.R. Hokanson (Eds.), *Rethinking special education for a new century*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, Progressive Policy Institute.

Lee, C. D. (2004). Double-voiced discourse: African-American vernacular English as resource in cultural modeling classrooms. In A. Ball & S. Freedman (Eds.), *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning* (pp. 129-147). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, C.D. (2007) *Culture, literacy, and learning: Taking blooming in the midst of the whirlwind*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Loury, G. C. (2002). *The anatomy of racial inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Oxford, UK: Westview Press.

Madhubuti, H. (1990). *Black men: Obsolete, single, dangerous?* Chicago: Third World Press.

Marable, M. (1992) *Black America*. Westfield, NJ: Open Media.

Marable, M. (1995). *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African American politics*. New York: Verso.

Marable, M. (1997). *The crisis of color and democracy: Essays on race, class, and power*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.

Markowitz, J., Garcia, S., & Eichelberger, J.H. (1997). *Addressing the disproportionate placement of students from racial and ethnic minority groups in special ed programs and classes*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

Montoya, M. (1995). Mascaras, trenzas, y greñas: Un/masking the self while un/braiding Latina stories and legal discourse. In R. Delgado (Ed.), *Critical Race Theory: The cutting edge* (pp. 529-539). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Moynihan, D. P. (1965). *The Negro family: The case for national action*. Washington, DC. U.S. Government Printing Office.

Nasir, N., McLaughlin, M., & Jones, A. (2009). What does it mean to be African American? Constructions of race and academic identity in an urban public high school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 73-114.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The nation's report card: Achievement gaps: How Black and White students perform on NAEP*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The nation's report card: Achievement gaps: How Black and White students perform on NAEP*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity. The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Boston: Pearson.

Noguera, P. A. (2008). *The trouble with Black boys and other reflections on race, equity, and the future of public education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Noguera, P. (2003). The trouble with Black boys: The role and influence of environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African-American males. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 431-459.

## **Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Identities**

---

Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Page, H. (1997). "Black Male" imagery and media containment of African-American men. *American Anthropologist*, 99(1), 99-111.

Patterson, O. (2006). A poverty of the mind. *New York Times*, March 26, Section 4, 13.

Price, J. (2000). *Against the odds: The meaning of school and relationships in the lives of six African American men*. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Ryan, W. (1971). *Blaming the victim*. New York: Random House.

Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2008). *Given half a chance: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males*. Cambridge, MA: The Schott Foundation for Public Education. Retrieved September 1, 2009 from <http://www.schottfoundation.org>.

Scott, D. M. (1997). *Contempt and pity: Social policy and the image of the damaged Black psyche*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Selden, S. (1999). *Inheriting shame: The story of eugenics and racism in America*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (2000). School discipline: From zero tolerance to early response. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 335-347.

Skiba, R. J., Robert, S., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., and Peterson, R. L. (2007). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review*, 34(4), 317-342.

Spring, J. (2006). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797-811.

Steele, C. M. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi and other clues to how stereotypes affect us*. New York: Norton.

Terman, L. (1916). *The measurement of intelligence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Terry, C. L., Sr. (2010). Prisons, pipelines, and the President: Developing critical math literacy through participatory action research. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 1(2), 73-104.

Terry, C. L., Sr. (2011). Mathematical counterstory and African-American male students: Urban mathematics education from a critical race theory perspective. *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, 4(1), 23-49.

Waxman, H. C., & Huang, S. (1997). Classroom instruction and learning environment differences between effective and ineffective urban elementary schools for African American students. *Urban Education*, 32(4), 7-44.

Williams, R. F. (2009). Black-White biracial students in American schools: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 776-804.

Willis, P. (1981). Cultural production is different from cultural reproduction is different from social reproduction is different from reproduction. *Interchange*, 12, 48-67.

Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*. New York: Knopf.

Wilson, W. J. (2009). *More than just race: Being Black and poor in the inner city*. New York: Norton.